

'I make the product': Do-it-yourself ethics in the construction of musical careers in the Portuguese alternative rock scene

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Abstract

The approach of do-it-yourself (DIY) musical careers lies in the premise that music is a unifying set of activities, understood as a cluster of several practices and lifestyles. The analysis of musical production is usually based on an entrepreneurial perspective about creative workers and, specifically, about the musicians. In this context, it can be useful to revisit one of the core values of the punk subculture, the DIY ethos, based on empowerment, on taking possession of the means of production, as an alternative to mainstream production circuits. It's about mobilizing DIY skills (strength, achievement, freedom, collective action) as new standards to promote employability, managing the uncertainty and precariousness of this option in terms of building a professional career. Starting from the case of two projects from Lisbon — Filho Único and HAUS — we intend to explore the relevance of DIY logics and procedures in the construction and maintenance of musical careers in the alternative rock, considering their impact on Lisbon alternative music scenes.

1. Introduction

The approach of do-it-yourself (DIY) musical careers is usually based on the premise that music is a unifying set of activities, understood as a cluster of interrelated traded and untraded activities (Becker, 1982; Leadbeater & Oakley, 1999; Menger, 1999). On one hand, this pole of activities structures the revenue and income sources of musicians and other agents of the field and on the other hand their lifestyles and daily lives. At this level, the analysis of musical production is based on an entrepreneurial perspective about creative workers and, specifically, about the musicians. Considering the cultural field as a whole, authors like Charles Leadbeater and Kate Oakley (1999) have paid particular attention to the 'new independents', freelancers workers involved in a logic of reducing specialization and promoting multiple skills, which makes them simultaneously assume the role of musicians, producers, designers, and promoters, generating contamination between various artistic and creative sub-

sectors, challenging boundaries between the professional and the amateur in a social sphere marked by relational densification (Hennion, Maisonneuve & Gomart, 2000). In a report focusing in the UK, Leadbeater and Oakley show the importance of the cultural entrepreneurs. They assume the existence of a knowledge gap in public policy about the new generation of entrepreneurs and their importance at different levels, which enhance the relevance of research about this kind of agents. Who are they? How do they work? Which are the strengths and weaknesses of the businesses they create? What kind of relations do they establish to build and manage their careers? These are some of the questions they try to answer, showing why the 'new independents' and the way they work matter, something that we want to explore considering the Portuguese case and the music field, more specifically, the alternative rock scene of Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas.

This emphasis is based on the exercise of social theory to revisit one of the core values of the punk subculture and also of the indie music scene — the DIY ethos (Dale, 2008, 2010; McKay, 1998; Moran, 2010), based on an empowerment logic, on taking possession of the means of production, as an alternative to mainstream production circuits. It's about mobilizing DIY skills (strength, achievement, freedom, collective action) as new standards to promote employability, managing the uncertainty and the precariousness of this option in terms of building a professional career (Borges & Costa, 2012; Menger, 1999).

"It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!" it is what The Desperate Bicycles said at the conclusion of their 1977 single, 'Smokescreen'/ 'Handlebars'. In other songs they took the same message saying "if you can understand, go and form a band!" ('The Medium was Tedium') or "cut it, press it, distribute it, xerox music's here at last!" ('Don't Back The Front'). In fact, they have been perceived as critical players in the development of the DIY scene. Another example was Crass, an anarcho-punk band who sought its independence through the control of the manufacture, distribution, and exchange by creating its own label and encouraging others doing the same (Dale, 2008). In both cases, the words 'indie' and 'independence' are being used to denote a specific economic modus operandi, significantly different from de major labels. At the same time, being independent or doing things in an independent way is here related with the demand of autonomy and freedom to be creative and to do what we like and what we believe. But it doesn't necessarily mean do it alone. On the contrary, as in the punk movement, DIY implies to belong to a network and be connected with different elements (Crossley, 2008, 2009, 2015). It emerges from a creative

community, based on collective ideals. These are developed under the sign of a reciprocity and trust economy (Tarassi, 2011), in a constant limbo between independence-interdependence and competitiveness-reciprocity, where the social/relational capital acquires extremely importance, as the dilution of the distinctions between work and leisure, producer and consumer (O'Connor & Wynne, 1996; Scott, 2014). So we think it's important to perspective the construction of these musical careers considering how this DIY is also a do-it-together (DIT), what kind of relations these agents establish between each other and how they influence the career paths of the musicians.

In this chapter, we focus on three dimensions of DIY ethos and ways of action which have concrete expression in the case of the Cultural Association Filho Único [Only Child], a reference in terms of alternative culture promotion in Lisbon, and also in the case of a more recent project — HAUS, a music centre. Considering interviews we have done with one of the founders of each project we explore the role of DIY as: 1) an alternative to the dominant logics and procedures; 2) an empowerment and independence tool; and 3) a collective way of act.

2. 'The medium was tedium'¹: DIY as an alternative to the dominant logics and procedures

The Cultural Association Filho Único emerged in early 2007 in Lisbon. It is a project of two young brothers (at that time with less than 30 years old) who always were related to music. Music was present in their lives since their childhood. One of them even started to write about music with 18 years old in a webzine called 'Put a da Subjectividade', because he hated everything which was written about music in the traditional press. And this is already a form of materialization of the DIY logic. It has to do with the recognition that the existing means don't have the expected quality and because of that, we should do something to fill that gap (Dale, 2008). He also worked in a record store and through this job and the webzine he started knowing several people related to music. The other became Dj with 18 years old and began to organize some parties. Later and for three years, both worked together at Galeria Zé dos Bois

¹ Single from The Desperate Bicycles released in February 1978.

(ZdB)², a non-profit organization created by a civic initiative which is also an art centre and a space of musical fruition and dissemination, based in an eighteenth-century palace in the heart of Bairro Alto, in Lisbon. They were responsible for programming and curating concerts. Like they say, to work at ZdB meant a kind of 'knowledge avalanche'. Almost all people with whom they had contact were musicians or were somehow related to music. Nowadays their network of social relations also revolves around the music — musicians, journalists, people from labels and distributors. Their lives are about music: they make music, they write about music in several national and international publications, they promote concerts and their cultural consumption and leisure time are mainly related to music. Everything intersects with music allowing them to be connected to it in an increasingly broadly, dense and rich way.

Having music such a relevant role and presence in their lives, in 2007 they decided to create the Cultural Association Filho Único. This decision is related to their personal tastes, with their way of being and with their attitude in general. After the work at ZdB, they felt the need and the desire to seek new approaches even because they detected a gap in the market — the city had big gaps at the alternative and independent music level. There were few concerts and little promotion.

Lisbon was a desert in terms of independent music, underground music. And I'm specifying that niche because it was a very large gap, which was sorely lacking to complete, it was a desert. (...) what made us create this is still a huge need to continue to do what nobody else does. (Filho Único co-founder)

In fact, several authors associate DIY to a specific action regime or model of work within the subjects tend to assume different roles in order to meet specific needs. It may be the need to do something that nobody else does (Bradley, 2004; Hein, 2012), or the need to act without many resources and to make money doing something that we really like, here in the case of artistic creation dissolving the distinction of art from commerce (Eversley, 2014; O'Connor, 2008; Reitsamer, 2011). DIY emerges as an alternative answer when the dominant logics and procedures don't work, when there is a gap, when people think they can do something to improve the surrounding environment. That's what Pete Bradley describes about Nottingham and his decision to create 'Enjoy the Ride',

² ZdB is generally consensually recognized as one of the main central cultural agents in alternative performing, visual art and music worlds in Portugal. For more information: <http://www.zedosbois.org/>.

an initiative that “offers an autonomous space for an audio-visual celebration of art, music, poetry, film and, generally, anything creative” (Bradley, 2004: 180). The project began with a shared perspective about the lack of venues and promoters in the city. Bradley was looking for a space to showcase his latest audio-visual work and was given the opportunity to put on a show at the café-bar where he worked. With the help of a network of artists, creative, and friends, Bradley created an experimental night called ‘Enjoy the Ride’, in which he and other artists show or perform some of their work. The first night was a success and he decided to transform this experience into a regular, monthly celebration.

The Cultural Association Filho Único appeared in a similar way. Considering the existence of failures in the programming and distribution of independent music and leveraging the knowledge and the relational network constructed through previous work experiences, the two brothers created their own and independent structure of communication and programming of independent music. They became at the same time artists, programmers, mediators and this is exactly the logic underlying the functioning of the association.

I think we're in a rebuilding and redesign process. I think the future, and already the present, is you create independent communication structures, you as an artist, as a developer. It's to create diffusion organs completely independent of the press and audio-visual hierarchy. It's you “destroy” the importance of these people and you being the artist or the programmer and at the same time, the mediator of what you do, because if you are really good and know what you're doing, you know communicate what you do better than anyone. (Filho Único co-founder)

The main objectives of the association are the presentation, promotion, production, edition, display and integration of all musical manifestations which are governed by progressive aesthetically creative purposes. The association seeks to promote, organize and produce events of things seen as the result of a progressive thinking, an attempt to aesthetic achievement. It seeks to integrate the more creative and daring music otherwise in people's lives. Nowadays Filho Único is a very important agent of the Portuguese alternative rock scene, an essential reference in terms of alternative culture promotion.

3. 'It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!':³ DIY as an empowerment and autonomy tool

If today, the words 'indie' and 'independent' are commonly taken only to be connotative of a musical style, here and like in the earlier punk and post-punk period we are using them to denote a specific way of work separateness from the major labels, from de main agents, from the dominant logics. Actually, the notion of 'indie' can be seen as an institutional challenge to the dominant majors and as an attempt to redistribute cultural capital and encourage self-expression (Dale, 2008; O'Connor, 2008). In this kind of perspective, the word 'indie' and the expression DIY are at the same time connected with the creation of an alternative and with an empowerment and action process. DIY skills (strength, achievement, freedom, and collective action), logics, and procedures enable these musicians and cultural promoters to create and promote what they want and what they think is important to the city's cultural scene in a context of creative freedom. In other words, we can see DIY skills, logics, and procedures as an empowerment and autonomy tool, as a way to work independently in relation to established standards and hierarchies, taking control of the entire process and of the management of musical careers, as it seems to happen with Filho Único.

At Filho Único, we have temporal, intellectual and emotional freedom (...) We can do what we really want, which is absolutely essential for the cultural, intellectual, spiritual and social life of the city. (Filho Único co-founder)

As Eversley (2014) observes, this simple desire is the basis for the ethical pillars in which this type of scenes rely on — responsibility, resourcefulness, and autonomy. But this does not mean that some success factors such as competence, focus on results, and all the work and all efforts around visibility, legitimacy, and impact of the project are disregarded. In general terms, they are identified as some of the key success factors in this sector and therefore articulated with the DIY logic and procedures.

In an article which reflects about the possibility of DIY be considered a counterculture, Hein (2012) shows that the punk rock scene has demystified the cultural production process, underlining the capacity everyone has to become a cultural agent. This dynamic is translated into DIY, a specific system of action that presided over the development of a punk entrepreneurship, relatively

³ The phrase with which the Desperate Bicycles' song 'Handlebars' ends.

independent from the mainstream recording industry. In fact, the author speaks about the development of an 'alternative economy' entrepreneurship. In this perspective, he says DIY shows that it is possible to develop a cultural business directed to a specific niche maintaining the punk's values can thus be considered a counterculture. DIY can promote the self-production of a cultural or musical scene taking part of an empowerment process, an awareness of action capacity. The involvement in DIY ethos encourages people to invent and innovate. In some way, it promotes experimentation and creativity, but as Hein underlines this dynamic depends on the actors' determination to create and to 'make the product'. Actors have to learn to identify the resources, to be aware of the opportunities and to build their own strategies. We can see DIY as an empowerment process through which a person or a group acquire the necessary resources to reinforce their action capacity and to emancipate themselves. So this empowerment process emerges as a promoter of creativity.

HAUS is another cultural project from Lisbon which promotes this empowerment process and stimulates creative freedom through the possibilities of share provided. The project started in 2015 and is assumed by its founders as a music centre where different valences are concentrated. As Filho Único, HAUS arises from a DIY attitude and a way of doing. Its founders, all of them with musical careers linked to punk and hardcore, did not wait, did not ask for support, they acted mobilizing its background, the knowledge, the tools, the networks of relationships they had and, above all, the fact that they were not afraid to fail. Above all things, it is the idea of DIY as a tool for autonomy and independence and as a way of empowerment.

At the same time, the elements that compose HAUS recognize that the particular DIY ethics which guide the activities and services developed by this project allows a democratization of the ways to create and consume music. It demystifies the traditional idea about all the resources needed to have a band or to release a record, contributing to the proliferation of the idea that everyone can do it (Dale, 2010; Eversley, 2014). At the same time, this promotes the breakdown of barriers between audience and artists.

The DIY spirit implies that if you are a fan, you must feel inspired to do. It is a very recurrent discourse. 'If he does, I also can do.' (...) To do is more important than a career or whatever, so it is because of that DIY is a super breeding ground for many people who are working today because it demystified it to match. It levelled the aspirations because somehow the entertainment system until the 90s was a more or less diagonal thing. The artist was someone

unattainable, superhuman (...) 'This is not for everyone.' The idea of being very difficult meant that the records and the concerts were the closest people could be to the artists. DIY dismantles it. You do not need to know how to play to have a band, you do not need to know how to write to have a fanzine. What matters is that you do and your perspective is very important. And this gives a lot of creative and expression freedom of creating new discourses, new vocabularies, and new techniques. (HAUS co-founder)

These changes are boosted with technological advances and the proliferation of Internet and of various social networks. Authors such as Oliver and Green have been working on the self-sufficiency of the DIY artist and the role of new technological tools at this level (Oliver & Green, 2009; Oliver, 2010). They show how important is to use all relevant tools in terms of databases, social networking, education, training, and communication. These information systems are essential to the fulfilment of creative activities. They introduce new forms of collaborative thinking, act as self-promotion tools of creative activities and enhance networking with other musicians and fans. In this way, they contribute to a profound change in modes of creation and interaction. Through these new technologies, artists and fans have the same opportunities for communication, information sharing, and visibility. In their daily work, HAUS' members mobilize recurrently these tools.

The Internet and then the technology that follows it facilitate the production of cultural products. Suddenly we are no longer dependent of many thousands of euros to rent a studio. The digital printing methods, the share of information on these networks and the democratization not only of the information but also of the technology allowed more people start working with a DIY spirit because it was easier to be independent. (HAUS co-founder)

4. 'Occupied Territory'⁴: DIY is also doing it together

The empowerment and autonomy associated to DIY are not something done alone. On the contrary, they are strongly connected with the idea of a creative community composed of several agents with different and complementary skills who assume a multiplicity of roles. Mobilizing those different skills, simultaneously, they assume the role of musicians, producers, designers, and promoters. They don't fit into neat categories. On the contrary and as we said before, they promote contaminations between different sectors of activity.

⁴ Single from The Desperate Bicycles released in July 1978.

Focusing on cultural workers (Leadbeater & Oakley, 1999), in a more general way, or specifically, on musicians (Eversley, 2014; O'Connor, 2008; Reitsamer, 2011), several authors have shown the collective and collaborative character of those agents' activities. Actually, collaborative team-working is a kind of norm in this DIY way of working. It can provide ideas, contacts, complementary skills, venues and access to the market. The guiding principle of the work in this DIY 'alternative economy' is not capital but the pursuit of creativity and community building. In this sense, these authors highlight the relevance of intensive strategies of social networking, considering this DIY approach unites the ideology of creativity with the aspirations of individual entrepreneurship and of social networks.

The fact that we do together implies to be with friends, to be with someone who is motivating you. That's why communities evolve faster. Who learn together, evolves faster because you have this side of the comparison, of healthy competition and motivation. (HAUS co-founder)

This leads us to the importance of do-it-together and of the role of creative community for the creation of musical careers. This perspective is based on a relational approach to music, understood as a collective creation, a product of the connection between the different elements that composed the worlds of music and between the complementary roles they play (Guerra, 2010, 2015; Crossley & Bottero, 2015; Crossley, McAndrew & Widdop, 2014; McAndrew & Everett, 2015). HAUS works precisely based on this premise. It is at the same time a recording studio, a set of rehearsal rooms, a space for agency and production of concerts and other shows and also a place where the relations between music and brands are explored. Actually, its founders see the project as a music centre where are concentrated different and complementary valences and whereby they play different roles going to meet the horizontal policy idea of Eversley (2014).

The business model reflects also that community attitude. It is not a linear studio. HAUS is organized as a music centre because we would like to add the maximum of skills and solutions to our experience of music. It's crucial to have a place to rehearse, a place where you may come and talk about the experience of doing with other people. The fact that the bands are together feeds and inspires many things and this is fundamental. To have a place with the quality for someone help you to record your music in the best possible way is also very important. To have someone who can help you and take you to the road or think with you about the best ways to promote what you're doing is also crucial. (HAUS co-founder)

The project results entirely of a previous musical career made together by the four founders of HAUS⁵. It emerges from the desire to share with other musicians the knowledge acquired in several years of studio and road. Therefore, the project is based on a community spirit and experience exchange. We can see HAUS as a way and a space of transmission, accumulation, and co-creation of knowledge. Something made by a group of people thinking about alternative forms of the Portuguese musicians create and manage forms of expression and income. Therefore, this is a project that seeks ways of sustainability not only to the elements that integrate it but also for other musicians related to it. As we said before, we can understand HAUS as an important space of socialization based on a deep symbiosis between the people who attend it. They form a community of affections, consisting of people united around the same principles and objectives (cognitive proximity), which is something characteristic of the independent and DIY ways of doing — the creation of an atmosphere of strong sociability and conviviality, essential to the creation and management of musical careers.

We are together. We all have valences, consciousness, and complementary knowledge, so we will join in because it's easier. This idea of symbiosis is natural and it depends on affinities and affections. (...) It only happens so because we know each other and we work together for a long time. And this is another marker of the independent and DIY scene. It's a chemical, an affinity that brings people together. The idea of community of affections applies here perfectly. There are not the shared goals of profit or whatever. It is the fact that people get along and want to do the same things or to go to the same places or want to share the experience of making music together. (HAUS co-founder)

This creative atmosphere or 'creative effervescence' (Crossley, 2015) and the idea of community of affections are also present on Filho Único activities and on its impact on new projects. We can say that nowadays Filho Único is a successful project and despite its beginning in a more independent spectrum, it has experienced a path characterized by a certain institutionalization. Today the cultural association is composed of seven elements and works in continuous and integrated collaboration with various public and private cultural agents all over the country. During all these years of experience, and being part of its working model, we must highlight the issue of proximity to the various cultural agents with whom Filho Único works. Not only the cognitive proximity, which means a

⁵ Apart from other older bands, currently they have a common band, called PAUS.

common set of ethics, civic principles, and goals, but also the physical or geographical one. This leads us to the existence of an atmosphere shared by a community and to the possibilities of creation of networks, essential to the success of this kind of projects. In the beginning Filho Único was located at Bica, a central area of Lisbon downtown near to Bairro Alto, assumed as the closer case to what is referred as a creative or cultural neighbourhood and recognized by the association's founders as the 'only truly creative centre of this country', where is everyone — musicians, visual artists, programmers, promoters and all the others cultural agents (cf. Costa, 2013 on this). Today Filho Único is located at Pólo Cultural das Gaivotas, a new centre of artistic creation, with offices and rehearsal rooms for projects in the areas of theatre, dance, and music. It is the city council who manages the space and it is entirely dedicated to the cultural sector, promoting synergies between the various projects.

As we said previously, today Cultural Association Filho Único has a recognized work in terms of the alternative musical offer and it has already begun to have an impact on a new generation of musicians, promoters, musical producers and labels of Lisbon whose work is inspired by the DIY ethos and procedures. And this is something that the founders of the project always wanted: to have an impact on other people and to change something that is not working correctly, showing that it is possible to act. That's one of the main DIY principles.

So I did to add. I did to change. I did to have an impact on people. And it was always because of that I started to work because I want to change something. There is something I don't like and I want to change it. I think this is the civic duty of the people. Put themselves in situations and positions of power where they have a lot of property and knowledge about a particular thing and act constructively, in an ethically correct and constructively way on this. (Filho Único co-founder)

5. Conclusion

As a result of the comparative analysis of these two case studies, we can take some ideas that give us a relatively clear panorama of some of the DIY ethics and mechanisms that base music projects in contemporaneity, particularly if we focus on the specific case of alternative rock scenes.

On one hand, we can see clear traces of this DIY ethos in the analysis of these agents' labour's logics. The 'new independents' that are the paradigm of

this kind of activities and practices can be seen as freelancer workers reducing specialization and promoting and seizing multiple skills, enabling them to assume, formally or informally, the role of musicians, producers, designers, promoters, generating contamination between various artistic-creative sub-sectors, and challenging boundaries between the professional and the amateur, between art and commerce, in a social sphere marked by relational densification. The artist-creator-consumer, seen here as a real entrepreneur of himself, between production and consumption, affirms himself in the core of these collaborative processes, and builds his/her career and professional trajectory in a self-built scene which is constructed, progressively, generating and exploring successive opportunities of self-capability-building, collective empowerment, and reinforcement of self-autonomy. Within this DIY labour's logics, the 'new independents' tend to adopt an approach to develop their careers as portfolios of projects, skills, and contacts. Collective learning mechanisms and shared knowledge accumulation are here fundamental.

On the other hand, we can also see clearly the presence of DIY in the development of alternatives to mainstream production circuits. These DIY circuits are strongly connected through networks and are based on relations of reciprocity, dialogue, and mutual help. In this sense, the agents who build these circuits have highly collaborative working practices developing more networked and horizontal forms of organization, creation, and production. In part, it is because of this collaborative and networked way of work they are able to build their autonomy and to challenge the dominant circuits. Filho Único and HAUS realize this sense of unity and sharing and this idea of a community of affections that have come to characterize and to strengthen the national circuit of independent music, showing the importance of physical/spatial and cognitive proximity (the same philosophy of action). In further work of our research project we intend to explore precisely the importance of these networks and creative communities in the construction and management of music careers, trying to understand the links between do-it-yourself and do-it-together.

Finally, we argue that the mobilization of traditionally acknowledged DIY skills (strength, achievement, freedom, collective action) enable these actors to promote a certain kind of employability (not necessarily the formal one we are used to), managing through time the uncertainty and precariousness of this option in terms of building a professional career. Engaging with the managerial process as well as the artistic one, they develop a kind of self-sufficiency, in the construction of their trajectories and life paths, which is reinforced by the degree

of integration in a specific scene they are into, locally and externally articulated through an extension of network mechanisms. There is a tendency to link this autonomy to technologic evolution. However, self-sufficiency is not just technologic. That is a part, which is decisively enabled in the music field by digitalization processes and internet, in recent decades, but mostly these self-sufficiency mechanisms come from the ability to build and manage economic, symbolic, cultural and social procedures that enable the agents to provide a space of autonomy from other hegemonic forces in each of those fields (from mainstream markets to social control or to the symbolic over-legitimization in certain art worlds), and DIY procedures give many tools for enabling this.

In further work of our research project, we will deepen our analysis of these aspects. We will also consider the relationship between music and the urban space, namely through the role that music scenes and these DIY musicians can play in the urban development and in the (re)construction of images and narratives of cities.

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